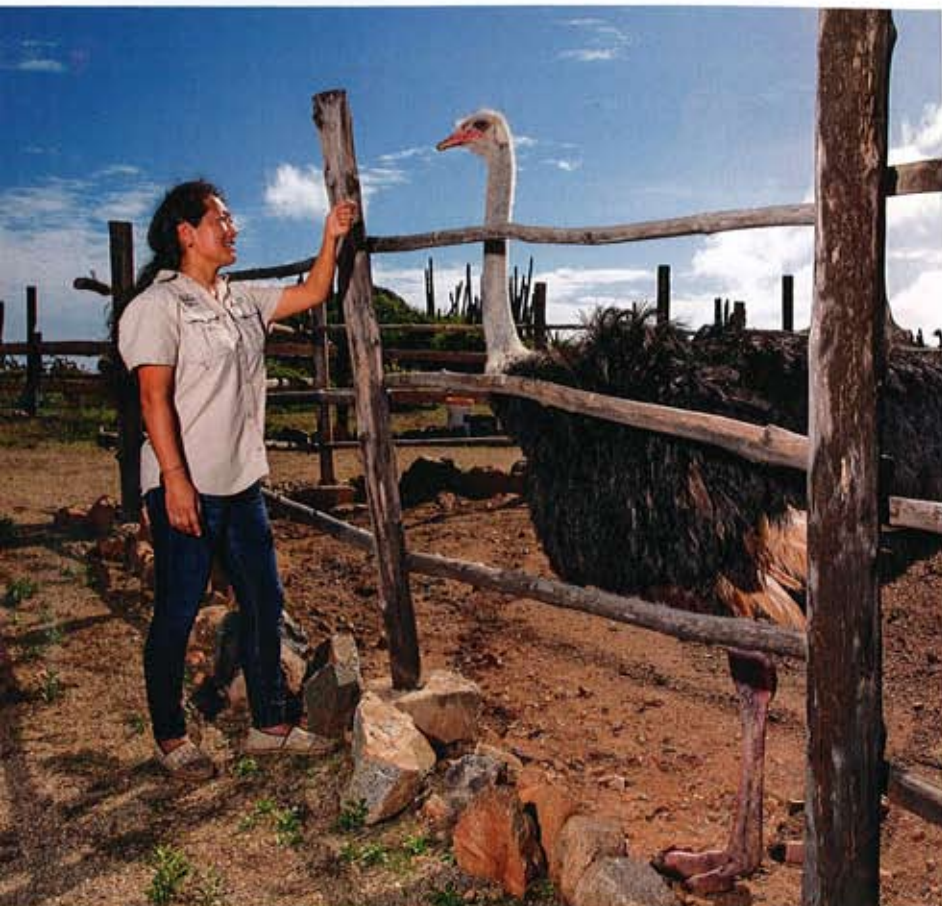




Feeding Time

at the Aruba Ostrich Farm with Marjan Walhain

"Hold the bowl of feed, stand backwards and just walk back until you hit the fence," instructs **Marjan Walhain**, General Manager of the *Aruba Ostrich Farm*. "Put your thumbs on the side of the bowl," she adds.

— By Amie Watson

And not a moment too soon, as the long necks of three seven-foot-tall ostriches reach around both sides of me through the horizontal wooden logs lining their pen. Organic food pellets are flying everywhere and I feel the reverberation of the loud, metallic bangs every time they jab their beaks into the aluminum bowl I'm holding in front of my chest.

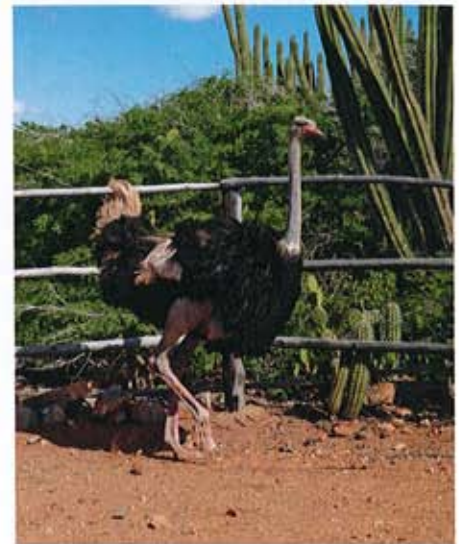
"They'll stop when you run out of feed," says Marjan as she takes my picture, "or you can just walk forward and push them away." I'm a bit afraid they'll get angry if I take away their feed (and I'll be the next thing jabbed), but Marjan's been working here for 11 years, so I start slowly walking toward her.

For animals that can't be trained, ostriches are not particularly violent. Their wings are too small and their bodies too big to fly. But they can run incredibly fast, kick hard and they have a big

nail on one of their toes that can rip you open. The expression on my face in the photo Marjan took is proof that I wasn't exactly at ease with three giant necks compressed against my upper arms in search of lunch. But the ostriches gave no resistance as I walked away with their food.

"Why do you have to feed them backwards?", I ask. "So you can make a nice picture!" Marjan answers. "Some people find it a little scary, but the ostriches are just curious. Kids love it." Besides, staff are always around to help if people are nervous. They'll also tell visitors to take off their big hoop earrings or tuck in their bikini strings – the ostriches are apparently very good at pulling them.

In addition to 22 ostriches and 16 emus, which are kept in pens so they don't compete with each other, the farm is also home to smaller animals that roam freely throughout the grounds. "The great thing is that if you're the first one to arrive to open the gate in the morning, the ducks, chicken, geese and peacocks that are loose come and greet you



Photography: Kenneth Theysen

and follow you through the parking lot. They know not to go out the gate. They're just waiting for their feed. At the end of the day, they're all waiting for you again. That's a great feeling."

One of her favorite times of the year is breeding season. The breeding season for ostriches runs from February until the end of August and the emu season is from October until February. "There'll be more than 80 little chicks running around together," she says. "So cute!"

One question Marjan gets asked all the time is 'Why ostriches?' Aruba already has a donkey sanctuary, a butterfly farm and an animal garden, but one of the *Ostrich Farm's* original owners was involved in an ostrich farm on Curaçao and decided to establish one here too. The ostriches took well to Aruba's desert-like climate. "It's fun to watch them, it's educational and it's a nice family outing," she says. "You get really up close and personal with the animals, something you don't experience in a zoo."

About 45,000 visitors come annually, says Marjan, mostly as part of tours offered by local

companies. Arubans also come when family or friends are visiting. Unlike the other animals, the three hippopotami aren't real. Three robust wooden recreations the size of benches encircle a pillar on the breezy, covered restaurant patio. They're hand-carved like the other sculptures that surround the 21-foot-long wooden tables. The tables themselves are crafted from 250-year-old trees from Colombia and are perfect for the daily tour groups that stop for lunches of traditional Aruban food such as *Pan Bati*, *Funchi* fries, grouper Creole as well as handcrafted burgers and *shoarma* pita pockets filled with chicken and a home-made garlic-yogurt dressing.

They don't sell ostrich meat at the restaurant, but when in season, they do serve ostrich and emu omelets (from eggs that won't become ostriches or emus). "Ostriches can live up to 70 or 80 years in captivity," says Marjan, but only up to a few baby ostriches will survive per year at the farm, since they let the ostriches live naturally and hatch their own eggs. But you can see the enormous ostrich and emu eggs.

The ostrich eggs are about 10 times the size of a chicken egg and are more cream-colored shells, while the emu eggs are slightly smaller but are dark green. Inside, both have yellow yolks, just like chicken eggs.

The gift shop is also stocked with African wood: boxes, bowls, decorative spoons and sculptures that the farm's original South African owner brought back for the shop. But the craftsmanship also applies to the mixture of jewelry, soaps and bags from Caribbean and local Aruban artisans (including *Tangerine's* wallets, toiletry bags and totes, see pages 8-9). "It's not mass production," says Marjan, "because if there's a story, you attach to it more."

After a morning spent with these enormous, graceful animals with their big, cartoonish eyes and wraparound necks, you too will have a story to tell. ■

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